

## Rabies and Horses

Several cases of rabies in horses have been reported so far in 2010 including cases in Louisiana, Colorado, Massachusetts and Michigan. These cases should serve as a reminder to horse owners of the importance of vaccinating for this terrible disease.

Rabies is caused by a virus that invades the central nervous system and causes a fatal encephalitis (inflammation of the brain). All warm-blooded animals, including horses and people, are susceptible to the disease. The virus is usually transmitted from animal to animal or animal to human through a bite wound, however, any contact with the bodily fluids of an infected animal constitutes exposure. There is no treatment for unvaccinated animals infected with rabies and the disease is 100% fatal.

Beginning in the 1940's, a massive government effort was mounted to eradicate rabies in the U.S. through vaccination of domestic animals, education programs, and testing and surveillance of wildlife populations. Due to these efforts, most people have never seen a rabid animal and many believe that rabies is no longer a threat to pets, livestock or people. However, rabies still remains a significant problem. In 2008, 49 states and Puerto Rico reported 6,841 cases of rabies in nonhuman animals and 2 cases in human beings. Raccoons, skunks and bats make up the majority of these cases, but 7% of cases were domestic animals--including 30 horses.

Thirty horses out of the millions of horses in the U.S. may seem insignificant to many horse owners. However, vaccinating your horse for rabies should be one of the easiest healthcare decisions you make for your horse. Why? Rabies is 100% fatal and virtually 100% preventable. If your horse is infected with rabies through the bite of an infected bat or skunk, there is no treatment. The horse will sicken and die or have to be euthanized. All family members, friends and medical personnel who come into contact with the infected horse will have been exposed and will have to undergo prophylactic treatment for rabies. On the other hand, the vaccine is relatively inexpensive and, when administered properly, is safe and completely effective. Unlike many vaccines, the rabies vaccine does not require a two-dose series the first year it is administered so it is easy to incorporate into your existing annual vaccine schedule. Ask us about adding rabies vaccine to your barn's vaccination protocol during our next wellness visit!